

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL MICHAEL
KERSHAW, U.S.
ARMY, COMMANDER, 2ND BRIGADE, 10TH MOUNTAIN DIVISION, MULTINATIONAL
DIVISION CENTER, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ

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LIEUTENANT COMMANDER BROOK DEWALT, USN (Office of the Secretary of Defense
for Public Affairs): Hello. I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of
Defense Bloggers Roundtable for Friday, October 5th, 2007. For archiving
purposes, this the second of two roundtables for today.

My name is Lieutenant Commander Brook DeWalt, with the Office of Secretary
of Defense, Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating our call today.

A note to our bloggers online today: please clearly state your name and
your blog or organization in advance of your question. And please respect the
colonel's time, keeping your questions succinct and to the point.

Today our guest from Iraq is Army Colonel Mike Kershaw, with Multinational
Division Center. Is that correct, sir?

COL. KERSHAW: That's correct.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: And he's also the commander of the 2nd Brigade Combat
Team. Colonel Kershaw is here today to provide an operational update with our
call-in participants. And Colonel, we're pleased to have you on today.

COL. KERSHAW: All right. I appreciate y'all having me on today.

Again, for all, Colonel Mike Kershaw. I command 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, out of Fort Drum, New York, currently with duty in Multinational Division Center, really located in South Baghdad, or the Mahmudiyah qadha, as it's known here.

We're at the 14th, entering the 15th month of a 15-month deployment, and the most notable things that have occurred here in an area that's been very hard-fought for the past 15 months have been real shift in the security situation as we have increasingly worked with the concerned citizens of South Baghdad.

As most of y'all know, this brigade has fought long and hard, and entered a tough sector and has fought really throughout this period. Really about this - I would say really since about May, June time frame, we began to work with the concerned citizen groups and really raised many of them from the local tribes here in South Baghdad. And it has caused a huge decrease in the number of attacks, both on coalition forces as well as Iraqi forces, and probably most importantly, on the local populace.

And really that's kind of all I wanted to say from a(n) introductory -- introduction standpoint, and I welcome any questions from anybody out there.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Great, sir. And we appreciate that.

First, if we can go to Andrew Lubin.

Q Great. Colonel, Andrew Lubin from ON Point. Can you talk to us in more depth about the concerned citizens group? Sounds a little bit like the Sons of Anbar out there. And is there a comparison? And how's it working?

COL. KERSHAW: Certainly, Andrew. I mean, I think there's a great comparison to be made between our concerned citizen movement and that which is going on in Anbar.

Again, in the western part of our sector, as you know it, it's predominantly Sunni, rural. The tribal linkages are strong, as I've been told that they are out in the Anbar province.

But of course as you approach the Mahmudiyah area, where we've raised these most recent tribes, we have both Sunni and Shi'a. I was in a meeting two days ago with a Shi'a tribe just outside of Yusufiya.

And so this also has a Sunni and Shi'a flavor down here in South Baghdad, although, to date, it has been primarily a Sunni movement, much like it is out in Anbar.

Q Okay. Thank you. Well, can I follow up? Because you're going to have a lot of people in here. I had heard that -- I thought that Mahmudiyah was primarily being -- I hate to use the term "ethnically transformed" -- that Shi'a's and JAM are pushing the Sunnis out. Has that stopped, or what's progressing on that front?

COL. KERSHAW: I'll tell you, Andrew, you know, since you left, we have had great success. Certainly what we were watching was JAM influence in Mahmudiyah. And our Iraqi army brigade and, you know, my 2nd Battalion, 15th Field Artillery -- as this has been going on really in the western part of my

sector, the concerned citizen movement, they have been able to target the JAM extremist groups that have been trying to prevent Sunnis from coming back into the city.

That, when coupled with qadha-wide reconciliation effort, which has been led by the mayor, to bring both Sunni and Shi'a sheikhs together, we're actually starting to see Sunni families move back into Mahmudiyah.

Q Oh, excellent. Is it the same mayor in Mahmudiyah?

COL. KERSHAW: Yeah, that's him.

Q Okay.

COL. KERSHAW: Mayor Mouayed al-Ameri.

Q Okay.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Great. Next, if we can go to Nicholas Beaudrot, if you could introduce yourself and your blog.

Q Thank you. And thanks, Colonel, for taking the time to talk to us.

Can you comment on this trade-off between security and mobility, how much you have to rely on measures like bans on car travel or 24- hour curfews that really restrict movement and commerce and things like that?

COL. KERSHAW: Yeah. It's Nick, right? Nicholas or Nick?

Q Yes. Yes, sir.

COL. KERSHAW: Yeah, Nick, yeah, that's a great debate. Matter of fact, I returned on a road today which has been closed to civilian traffic since really we've been here, fought our way in here and established our forward presence.

Last week we had a meeting -- actually, about two weeks ago we had a meeting with the local sheikhs, the concerned citizens in those areas; we've now had, you know, really, over a two-month period -- and I'll watch them, evaluate them -- and -- you know, really, to evaluate that, and the sheikhs had asked us to open the road to allow families to move back and forth and really for farmers to be able to have better access -- it's a paved road -- to give them an all-weather access to the markets. And I drove down that road today with civilians who come in through, you know, an Iraqi army checkpoint, travel the road freely and then exit through one of our checkpoints. And as security has improved, we've been able to open up more and more these type of routes as -- you know, to show the citizens a tangible benefit for their participating not just in their own security but ridding these areas of al Qaeda.

Q So if I can follow up, would you say that you're opening -- you're making more progress compared to, say, six months or a year ago as far as opening up travel for the Iraqi citizens?

COL. KERSHAW: Oh, certainly, certainly, Nick. You know, we've always had great inroads because we've been living out forward. But the degree of cooperation we were able to get from the tribes, because we still hadn't completely rid this area of al Qaeda, was still very, very erratic.

Now that the tribes, in cooperation with Iraqi and coalition forces, have been to drive the bulk of the al Qaeda terrorists out of the area, the tribes are now much more willing to come forward. As I said, as I got on this road today, a local concerned citizen group drove up in a pickup truck with a cache of 24 artillery rounds that had been buried in one of the local farms, and they brought those forward to us. And those were clearly intended for use as IEDs, and they brought those forward for us to destroy using our, you know, emergency ordnance disposal technicians. And so, you know, as we improve their lives, they are helping with the security situation even more.

Q That's great. Thank you.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Great. And, Nicholas, could you also just again clarify your blogsite name? Your --

Q I'm sorry. That's Nicholas Beaudrot of Electoral Math.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Electoral Math.

Q Yeah.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Okay. And, Andrew, any follow-up?

Q Absolutely. Colonel, can you talk to us a little bit about your search for Specialist Jimenez and Private Fouty?

COL. KERSHAW: Sure, Andrew.

Q That's unfortunately been forgotten in the media out here.

COL. KERSHAW: Sure. And -- but trust me, it's not forgotten, you know, here -- at least in this brigade, and no unit in Iraq has forgotten that, and I know the families haven't as well.

You know, Andrew, really, the first really intensive four to six weeks were really, you know, kind of a proverbial, you know, flood the zone, where we put, you know, all U.S. and Iraqi forces really on a massive -- you know, massive sweep through the area. We uncovered, you know, a number of leads that really took us in all directions.

You know, since then, we have very much refined that search and follow -- you know, we cross-check information more, although we really pursue any lead that comes in that we think can be substantiated.

Last week we had two very significant -- although they took us down very different trails, we followed very two significant leads; one which was actioned just the other day, and another, which was brought to action last night. And we still don't have the results of those actions.

But again, it now involves, you know, units, really, all across Iraq, all assets, but it's much more precise in its application now.

Q Are you getting any tips or any assistance from the locals and the concerned citizen group?

COL. KERSHAW: We've gotten a number of tips, Andrew, about this event, and really what it does is it's given us much greater detail in fidelity on the

members of the attack group. And we now think with a much higher degree of clarity, that we know who participated in the attack and who supported. In fact, we've been able to detain, kill or capture about 12 of these people, really, since the attack.

Q Great. I appreciate that.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Great. Nicholas, anything further on your end?

Q Yeah, that would be nice. This is Nicholas Beaudrot from Electoral Math again. So there -- in the reports we get in the states, there seems to be a disconnect between progress on the ground and progress at the national level with the central governments. Can you comment on what relationship exists between the sheikhs that you're meeting with and any representatives that they might trust in the central government?

COL. KERSHAW: Yeah, that's a great question as it gets to one of the major issues, I think, that others have identified not just here, but all across Iraq.

You know, here that issue plays out. We're very fortunate that we have not just the qadha leadership, you know, as Andrew mentioned, our mayor down here, but also our Iraqi army brigade commander and his battalion commanders that see the value of these concerned citizen groups. Now this has certainly been helped not just by the fact that sheikhs and tribal leaders have come forward, but also that former members of the military have stepped forward to lead these organizations to give them a much more organized and military-type, you know, kind of feel to them.

And so the Iraqi army officers, as they have gone out to coordinate with and inspect these concerned citizen units, they're talking in many cases to members of the former army, some of whom which they served with and at least know by reputation, and this serves to bridge a huge gap amongst these, you know, kind of sectarian fears that we hear so much that exist in Iraq. So at the local level we've been very fortunate. Our Iraqi army units embrace this, and in fact, the national government recently issued direct instructions to them to actively cooperate and, in fact, inspect these concerned citizen organizations.

But it's much harder for me to assess the national level leadership and what steps they are taking. Again, I know that the national government issued these orders to the army to work with the concerned citizens, and they have indicated in meetings that I've attended between the sheikhs as well as my Iraqi army counterparts in the government that they intend to take on this program, to take over payment of the concerned-citizen movement, the security guards, et cetera, et cetera, but we have yet to see any tangible movement on that yet and anxiously await it.

And I think it will be critical to demonstrating to these groups that their government is interested in working with them to better secure at least the Baghdad province.

Q And a quick follow-up there. Do you have any experience outside of the -- with the national government outside of the Iraqi army, either with the Interior Ministry or Health Ministry or any of the rest of the central government?

COL. KERSHAW: Really, it's only the Ministry of the Interior that we've dealt with a bit. There have been very few Iraqi police stationed down here in south Baghdad, really since our arrival and I think since coalition forces have been down here. It's a rural, you know, part of the province, so its priority is much more focused on the army than it is on the police. But we had elements of the Iraqi police that went around and administered the Iraqi police test to the concerned citizens and have proposed to establish, you know, additional set of police stations in this area. But most of our work has been really through the army and their Ministry of Defense counterparts.

Q Thank you.

Q If we have time, can I follow up on Nick's question?

Q Please.

Q Great. Colonel, when I was out in Anbar, General Zilmer told me the only time that they really got the money that was due them, that was announced, was when he went back there and yelled at people at MOI. Are you going to run into the same problems, where they make a lot of announcements and then, because it's a Sunni area, really nothing ever is transpired except a quick press conference?

COL. KERSHAW: I'm not sure -- I haven't followed all of what's happened out in Anbar. But here, again we've been encouraged by the fact that the Iraqi army has been ordered to cooperate and coordinate with these concerned citizen groups. Now what it allows me to do is, instead of just going to meet these sheikhs and former military officers and then tell my Iraqi army brigade commander what's going on, he now accompanies me to these meetings. And General Ali has been in the last three of these meetings that I've conducted, two Sunni, one Shi'a, one near the Russian power plant -- which I'm sure you remember, Andrew --

Q I remember that.

COL. KERSHAW: -- and two -- one near Yusufiya and one near Mahmudiyah. So the army has moved out ahead, and I certainly think the Ministry of the Interior should move forward as well. But we just have much less experience, Andrew, working with that ministry.

And of course, the Iraqi police have always been undermanned down here, although recent recruiting efforts have met some success. And we've just received a new Iraqi patrol police chief, who is already making a big difference down here with that organization.

Q We were talking with Lieutenant Colonel Ken Adgie last week. He was saying that he's getting a lot of people to sign up to be IPs, but they want to stay in that area, they want to stay in their village. You running into the same type of thing? You know, they'll be IPs, but they want to be local IPs?

COL. KERSHAW: Well, Andrew, what we see here is -- you know, in the terms of the Iraqi security forces, when you join the police, you can essentially remain in your own area. If you're going to be an officer in the police, then you're subject to moving, but -- you know, Iraqi police service has always essentially been local. It's the army that has a national commitment.

Actually, what we find is initially what people tell us is they want to join the police, but the further and the longer we interact, more former military officers have said they want to step forward and really what they want to do is join the Iraqi army. And many -- General Ali accepted a list of 29 names that came from the Zobai (ph) tribe. It was presented to him by two former army officers and a Zobai (ph) sheikh and one of the leaders of the concerned citizen movements out there to process them back in directly to the army.

So we really see, you know, a kind of an initial -- they want to be in the police and they want to stay local, but then -- again, Andrew, this is an area that had a strong, you know, representation in the old army. And many of these former officers -- former soldiers really want back in the old Iraqi army. And General Ali is really on point for getting them back in.

Q Is that the General Ali I met when I was down with 215?

COL. KERSHAW: That's him, Ali Abu Freji (ph).

Q Yeah okay, yeah. Good man, very good man.

Are you using CERP funds to -- for your local IPs, or you getting -- are they getting money out of the government?

COL. KERSHAW: Well, the local Iraqi police, of course, are funded by their government, and, you know, we have a bureaucratic organization, you know, CPAT, which is basically a police, you know, assistance organization here in the country up at the MNC-I and the MNF-I level that support them. For our -- you know, for these tribal security units, we really use CERP funds to help stand them up and get them going.

And we have deliberately, you know, graduated that pay to, you know, a degree that's two-thirds of that of an Iraqi police officer so we're not competing with the local police and we're giving them kind of their next step. And that's probably why -- another one of the reasons we've had such a great turnout with Iraqi police recruiting in these sectors.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Great. All right, thank you.

Any final questions?

Q Nick, go ahead, I've been -- (inaudible).

Q Oh, I'm done, thank you.

Q Hey, Colonel, one more thing. I need an address from somebody over there. I got The New York Times article from -- about 215 that was on Sunday's front page. Give me an address, I'll put it in the mail this afternoon, if you guys haven't seen it already.

COL. KERSHAW: Shoot, what's our address there, Webb? Unit 43?

Q If he wants to e-mail it to me, that would be great. (Inaudible) -- don't know whether you've seen --

COL. KERSHAW: Oh, yeah, we've got your e-mail.

Tell you what, e-mail Andrew our mailing address.

Q (Off mike) -- shoot me the address, I'll get the hard copy out this afternoon to you.

COL. KERSHAW: Yeah, Webb's going to e-mail that to you tonight when we get back.

Q Great, appreciate that.

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: Fantastic, well, I want to thank you all. We've had some great questions and some great comments today. As we do wrap up today's call, I'd like to ask Colonel Kershaw if he has any final comments.

COL. KERSHAW: Oh, hey, thanks, I appreciate it.

I appreciate all you all coming on here tonight to spend some time with us. Again this has been a long deployment for us. You know, Andrew's been out here a couple times. 15-month deployment's a long time to be away from families. And certainly this has been a tough area to operate in. And we're all anxious to get home. Everybody's anxious to be reunited with their families, get back to see friends, parents, loved ones, or just to unwind a little bit back at Fort Drum or wherever else guys are going to take off to when we get back.

But I think one of the things that we're going to be able to leave behind is an area that's better than when we found it. And we were fortunate to follow a unit that fought hard to get in here and we were able to kind of capitalize on what they were able to do. And we think we were able to take it to the next level.

We're confident that the Rakkasans, 3rd Brigade of the 101st, coming in behind us, is going to be able to do the same. So thanks for your all support. Thanks for spending time with me this evening and getting the word out on what the Commando Brigade has been able to accomplish down here in South Baghdad. Thanks again.

(Cross talk.)

LT. CMDR. DEWALT: And I just want to close by saying, today's program will be available online at the Bloggers Roundtable link on dod.mil, where you'll be able to access a related story along with the source documents, including this audio file, a print transcript and the colonel's bio. If there are any questions about the program, please contact DOD New Media at (703) 428-1204.

Again thank you very much, Colonel. And to our blogger participants, thank you as well. And this does conclude today's event. Please feel free to disconnect at any time.

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